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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 3590
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3793
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000318

SIPDIS

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ALSO FOR IO/A A/S WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY, KAHL, AND DALTON
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DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2019

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HIZBALLAH'S INTIMIDATION TACTICS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Lebanese Shi'a journalist, Tha'ir Abbas, who does not support Hizballah, reported he was harassed by Hizballah following his return from the United States, after covering the November 2008 presidential elections. His visit was funded by his newspaper, Ash-Sharq al-Awsat. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On March 13, Embassy Public Diplomacy (PD) staff met with Beirut-based, Lebanese journalist Tha'ir Abbas of the Saudi-owned newspaper, Ash-Sharq Al-Awsat. Abbas, who is Shi'a, has been a PD contact for several years and is well-known for his objective reporting. While he does not write anti-Hizballah reports, he is known for not being a Hizballah supporter. His residence is located in Dahiyeh in Beirut's southern suburbs, a Hizballah stronghold.

¶3. (C) Abbas went to the United States in November 2008 to cover the U.S. presidential elections. Following his return to Beirut, three members of Hizballah visited him at home, he reported. One member entered the house and the other two stayed on the stairs near his apartment: one on the stairs leading up and one on the stairs leading down. Abbas asked the one Hizballah member who entered his house to stay in the doorway. This person told him that he wanted to ask him some questions. Abbas told him that he would answer his questions only near the door.

¶4. (C) This Hizballah member asked Abbas about every member of his family, including his wife, Linda Ayyach, who is a journalist for Hiya Magazine, and his two children. Allegedly, the questions were: what type of cars Abbas and his wife drive; which school do the children attend (Note: They attend an evangelical school. End Note.); what are their political affiliation/s, even the political affiliation of his eight-year old daughter; whether Abbas supports Hizballah; and, what was the reason for his visit to the United States. One of the questions that caught Abbas' attention was whether he has access to the Internet in his house and the reason he does. Abbas said he answered all of the questions because, as he explained to PD, since he lives "in Hizballah's stronghold," he always tries to avoid problems and keeps a low profile.

¶5. (C) Following that incident, Abbas learned through his contacts that the security wing of Hizballah has contacts

with all the concierges in the area buildings who "spy" on residents and report back to Hizballah. After the visit, Abbas has noticed that he is often followed by another car. He told PD staff that his phone is tapped, that he has another phone which he uses for personal business, and he changes his personal telephone number constanly.

¶16. (C) Abbas said he told his story to a peson close to Sunni majority leader Saad Hariri, who in turn told Hariri. According to Abbas, Hariri, who sees Abbas on a routine basis and knows him well, allegedly called Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, but was referred to Nasrallah's political assistant, Hassan Khalil. Hariri told Khalil what happened, noting that Hizballah has no right to act in this manner, particularly with journalists "who work for Saudi-owned newspapers." Hariri warned that, by acting this way, Hizballah was damaging its relations with him.

¶17. (C) After Hariri's phone call, Abbas claimed he received a phone call from Hizballah's media advisor at the time, Hussein Rahhal, who blamed Abbas for letting the story reach Hariri, and tried to belittle the incident. Since that phone call, Abbas has been harassed publicly several times by members of Hizballah. Once, he said, there was a hot exchange between him and a person who blocked his way while he was trying to leave the garage in his building. This person closed the garage for about two hours, making it impossible for Abbas to leave. On another occasion, Abbas was harassed by a Hizballah member who was about to hit him. Another time he received a phone call from a member of Hizballah when he published an interview with Ahmad Al-Asaad,

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an independent Shi'a figure who is critical of Hizballah.

¶18. (C) Abbas said he lives in constant anxiety over the possibility of being harassed by Hizballah. He explained that he looked into the possibility of selling his house and moving away, but he ruled out the idea because of the high prices elsewhere. He characterized the atmosphere in the Dahiye as "extremely intimidating" following the July 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah, noting that Hizballah has its own police force now on every street in Beirut's southern suburb. He also said, "Hizballah members were extremely kind and open before July 2006, but now they are completely different." For them, he noted "everyone is an Israeli or an American agent until the contrary is proven."

SISON